



DIVISION ON DEAF, DEAFBLIND AND HARD OF HEARING

DATE: February 23, 2016

TO: House Health Policy Committee

FROM: Annie Urasky
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Michigan Department of Civil Rights

SUBJECT: House Bills 5182, 5183, 5184, 5185, 5186, 5187, and 5188

Chairperson Callton, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of these bills today. My name is Annie Urasky and I am the Director of the Division on Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing, housed within the Michigan Department of Civil Rights.

The seven bills that are before you today are part of a package of bills that seek to correct the outdated, and in some instances even offensive, language used in Michigan laws that impact the lives of Michigan residents and visitors who are d/Deaf, d/DeafBlind or hard of hearing. The bills come from a group of Michigan legislators on the bipartisan Michigan Legislative Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Caucus established in 2015, devoted solely to examining the issues of these Michiganders. I would be remiss if I did not thank them for their efforts.

Caucus members have met with many different and diverse groups, often representing individuals with different concerns and priorities. They have discovered that the concerns of persons who are d/Deaf, d/DeafBlind, and hard of hearing differ from each other in unique ways, just as with any other group whose individual members have differing opinions and views. The Caucus is working on some very difficult and even contentious issues like mental health and education, on which the only point of complete agreement may be that something needs to be done. Those efforts are ongoing and we look forward to continuing to work with them in search of common ground, sound policy, and good legislation.

However, the Caucus has found some areas where there is no disagreement, including in particular, the language used in Michigan laws. I am referring to language that may have been appropriate, or at least acceptable, at the time the laws were initially drafted and adopted, but which is at best outdated today.

Issues like the Michigan School for the Deaf and the mental health needs of Michiganders who are d/Deaf, d/DeafBlind, or hard of hearing, are enormously important. They are so important that they should be analyzed and addressed independently as the Caucus is currently doing. The bills before you are not substantive changes in law, they are important changes in language. These seven bills may not 'fix' the big issues and problems faced by those who are d/Deaf, d/DeafBlind, or hard of hearing – but at least they show that Michigan law has respect to them. Attaching complicated and contentious issues to them would only serve to either adopt new law without sufficient discussion, or delay the adoption of these language corrections. These bills certainly will not get us where we want to be legislatively, but they are an important first step. The Michigan Department of Civil Rights, Division on Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing urges you to take that step.